

History Notes: Speakers of the Legislative Assembly
July 2016. Updated June 2021

Speakers of the LA

Sir James Lee Steere: son of a fox hunting squire

The first Speaker of the Legislative Assembly was Sir James Lee Steere. He was born in Surrey, England in 1830 to a 'fox hunting Tory squire' who sat in the House of Commons for the western division of Surrey. In 1859 James Lee Steere married the 'belle of Perth', Catherine Anne Leake, sister of Luke Leake, first Speaker of the Legislative Council, and the following year they migrated to Western Australia. Lee Steere was offered a partnership with pastoralist, JH Monger for a property on the upper Blackwood River. He purchased Jayees Station, a 100,000 acre property in the Blackwood district. Governor Hampton nominated Lee Steere in 1868 to the Legislative Council. In 1870 he won the seat of Wellington but lost it in February 1880, however he was elected in a by-election in May that year for the seat of Swan. In 1884 he did not contest Swan but the next year he was nominated as member of the Legislative Council. In May 1886, the Speaker of the Legislative Council, Sir Luke Leake died on a visit to London and Lee Steere was elected to the position. The first parliament under responsible government was elected in 1890 and Lee Steere stood and won the lower house seat of Nelson. The same year he was elected Speaker of the Legislative Assembly. He was Speaker for thirteen years until his death on 1 December 1903 at St George's Terrace, Perth.



The last Executive Council before responsible government in WA, c1890
James Lee Steere is standing at the back on the right hand side.
Photograph courtesy of State Library of WA: [BA559/94](#)



"Honourable members, I desire to thank you for having placed me in this dignified and honourable position, as Speaker of the Legislative Assembly. I can assure you I value it very highly indeed, believing as I do that it is one of the most dignified positions which any man can hold in any country, that of Speaker of the representatives in the people's House."

Sir James Lee Steere

Parliamentary Debates
(WA Hansard)

17 August 1897

First Madam Speaker of the House: Hon Michelle Roberts

The newest Speaker (30th) of the Legislative Assembly is the Hon Michelle Roberts. She is the first woman to hold the position in the Parliament of Western Australia in 131 years. She was elected to the role on 29 April 2021.

On 19 March 1994, Michelle Roberts won the seat of Glendalough in a by-election, following the resignation of Dr Carmen Lawrence, former premier of Western Australia. The seat of Glendalough was abolished in 1994, and at the next election on 14 December 1996, Roberts won the seat of Midland which she still holds.

From 2001 to 2005, Roberts was Minister of Police and Emergency Services. After Labor's win at the March 2017 election, she was appointed Minister for Police and Road Safety which she held until 19 March 2021.

Michelle Hopkins Roberts was born in Perth on 29 February 1960 to William and Frances Thomas.

Charles Hopkins, the former Lord Mayor of Perth is her uncle. She was educated at Sacred Heart in Point Peron; Highgate and North Inglewood primary schools and Mercedes College in Perth. She graduated with a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Western Australia and then completed a Diploma in Education.

Roberts joined the Australian Labor Party in 1978 and was the first woman President of the state Australian Labor Party, from 2000 to 2007.

After university, Roberts was a teacher at John Curtin Senior High School from 1983 to 1987. In 1983, she married Gregory Roberts at Mercedes Chapel in Perth and they have three daughters. From 1987, Roberts worked as a policy and research officer with various government departments.

Roberts was a councillor for the City of Perth from 1986 to 1993 and Deputy Mayor for the last two years of her service.

"Next to parents, teachers are the most important influence on the lives of young Western Australians. They are well aware that a quality education is the greatest gift which can be provided to young people."

Inaugural Speech, Legislative Assembly, Western Australian Debates (Hansard), 30 March 1994



The Hon Michelle Roberts "on the steps of Parliament House in West Perth" 21 March 2021

Photographer:
Jackson Flindell,
The West
Australian

Hon Peter Watson: Telegram boy to Speaker of the House

Peter Bruce Watson was the 29th Speaker of the Legislative Assembly. He was born in Reservoir, Victoria on 30 May 1947 to air force officer, Frank Watson and his wife, Peggy Watson. He was educated at Hutton St Primary School, Northcote and Sale high schools in Victoria. When his father retired from the Royal Australian Air Force in 1961, the family moved to Perth and Watson attended Perth Modern School.

Watson began his working life as a telegram boy for the Post Master General and worked his way up to become a post office manager. He also ran a newsagency in Denmark, WA.

In 1968, Peter Watson represented Australia at the Mexico Olympics. He fell ill the night before his 1,500 metres event and ran 10 seconds slower than expected. However he still holds WA's 1500 metres record.

In 2000, Peter Watson joined the Australian Labor Party. He was elected to the seat of Albany on 10 February 2001 defeating Kevin Prince, a Minister in the Richard Court government.

In May 2017, Watson was elected to the role of Speaker of the Legislative Assembly. He had acted in the role twice between 2005 to 2013. He retired at the 13 March 2021 election.

Fatherly advice

"My father always had three pieces of advice for me: listen to what other people say; treat others as I want to be treated; and that I would get back only what I put in."

Inaugural Speech
Legislative Assembly
Western Australian Debates
(Hansard)
22 May 2001



Premier Mark McGowan, new Speaker Member for Albany Peter Watson and member for Kwinana Roger Cook yesterday.

Picture: Simon Santi. Courtesy **The West Australian**, 12 May 2017, 10:30am

“Not of their own initiative...”

The Speaker is the presiding officer of the Legislative Assembly. At the start of a new Legislative term, the members of the House elect a Speaker, “not of their own initiative, but in obedience to the Governor’s command”. The roles of the Speaker are based on the constitution but have evolved from Westminster traditions and Western Australia’s political history. The Speaker applies the Standing Orders (rules) and practices of the Legislative Assembly. The Speaker must exercise fairness and political impartiality to all members, despite their political allegiance. Speakers have rarely entered debate in the House however before responsible government was created in 1890, the Speaker of the Legislative Council sometimes debated and voted on the floor of the chamber.



*John Hearman, Speaker,
c28 July 1966*
Parliament of WA
collection

John Merrifield Hearman was born in Richmond, England, 1910 and emigrated to Australia as a child. He was a student at Guildford Grammar school. From 1930 he farmed at Donnybrook, WA and he served in the army during World War II. Hearman was elected to the seat of Blackwood in 1950 which he held until 1968. He was Speaker of the Legislative Assembly from 1959 to 1968. John Hearman died in Donnybrook in 1994.

Speaker’s role

The Speaker’s tasks are to:

- apply Standing Orders (rules) and practices of the chamber
- ask members to speak, ask questions, and move motions (for which they have given notice)
- maintain order
- vote only in the case of a tie
- guide members in their behaviour, language and dress
- control visitors’ behaviour in the public gallery
- act as spokesman for the Parliament
- administer Parliament House with the President and the executive management team

Speakers past

The role of the Speaker is an ancient office of the Westminster parliamentary system. The first Speaker was appointed in 1377. The House of Commons was only allowed to address humble petitions to the Crown through its appointed spokesman, the Speaker. When the opinion of the majority was agreed, the Speaker was sent to express it to the Crown. At least nine British Speakers died violently because the monarch did not like what they said.

The representative government phase in Western Australia started in 1870. The new constitutional arrangement required a member of the Legislative Council to be elected in the honorary role of Speaker before any business began. On 5 December 1870 at the first Legislative Council meeting, Sir Luke Leake, MLC Perth accepted the speakership. When responsible government was established in 1890, Sir James Lee Steere was elected as Speaker for the Legislative Assembly.

Traditionally Speakers have worn a wig and gown. The Hon Peter Watson parted from tradition and did not wear the black robes of office. The Hon Michelle Roberts has followed suit.

Speakers of the Legislative Assembly

No	Name	Period as Speaker	Electorate	Party
1	Lee Steere, James George	30 Dec 1890 – 30 Nov 1903	Nelson	-
2	Harper, Charles	2 Dec 1903 – 27 July 1904	Beverley Forrest	-
3	Quinlan, Timothy Francis	23 Nov 1905 – 8 Oct 1911	Toodyay	Lib
4	Troy, Michael Francis	1 Nov 1911 – 13 Feb 1917	Mount Magnet	ALP
5	Johnston, Edward Bertram	13 Feb 1917 – 1 Mar 1917	Williams-Narrogin	CP
6	Gardiner, James	1 Mar 1917 – 28 June 1917	Irwin	CP
7	Taylor, George	19 July 1917 – 23 July 1924	Mount Margaret	Natl
8	Walker, Thomas	24 July 1924 – 29 July 1930	Kanowna	ALP
9	Stubbs, Sydney	30 July 1930 – 17 July 1933	Wagin	CP
10	Panton, Alexander Hugh	18 July 1933 – 24 Mar 1938	Leederville	ALP
11	Johnson, William Dartnell	4 Aug 1938 – 2 Aug 1939	Guildford-Midland	ALP
12	Sleeman, Joseph Bertram	3 Aug 1939 – 31 July 1947	Fremantle	ALP
13	North, Charles Frederic John	31 July 1947 – 5 Aug 1953	Claremont	Lib
14	Rodoreda, Aloysius Joseph	6 Aug 1953 – 1 Aug 1956	Pilbara	ALP
15	Hegney, James	2 Aug 1956 – 29 June 1959	Mount Hawthorn	ALP
16	Hearman, John Merrifield	30 June 1959 – 23 Mar 1968	Blackwood	Lib
17	Guthrie, Hugh Norman	25 July 1968 – 20 Feb 1971	Subiaco	Lib
18	Toms, John Mervin	15 July 1971 – 8 Oct 1971	Ascot	ALP
19	Norton, Daniel	16 Nov 1971 – 30 Mar 1974	Gascoyne	ALP
20	Hutchinson, Ross	22 May 1974 – 19 Feb 1977	Cottesloe	Lib
21	Thompson, Ian David	24 May 1977 – 21 Mar 1983	Kalamunda	Lib
22	Harman, John Joseph	22 May 1983 – 8 Feb 1986	Maylands	ALP
23	Barnett, Michael	10 June 1986 – 17 June 1993	Rockingham	ALP
24	Clarko, James George	17 June 1993 – 14 Dec 1996	Marmion	Lib
25	Strickland, George Joseph	6 Mar 1997 – 10 Feb 2001	Innaloo	Lib
26	Riebeling, Fredrick	1 May 2001 – 6 Sept 2008	Burrup	ALP
27	Woodhams, Grant Allen	6 Nov 2008 – 9 March 2013	Moore	Nat
28	Sutherland, Michael William	11 April 2013 – 11 March 2017	Mount Lawley	Lib
29	Watson, Peter Bruce	11 May 2017 – 13 March 2021	Albany	ALP
30	Roberts, Michelle Hopkins	29 April 2021 –	Midland	ALP

Abbreviations

ALP	Australian Labor Party
CP	Country Party
Ind	Independent
Lib	Liberal
Nat	National Party of Australia (Nationals WA)
Natl	Nationalist

Sources

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